Equiano’s *Landscapes*: Viewpoints and Vistas From the Looking Glass, the Lens, and the Kaleidoscope

APRIL LANGLEY—UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA

Abstract

For “notable black American travelers,” such as Equiano, the experience of Benin (Africa) preceded the experience of England (Europe) whether real or imagined. Thus, eighteenth-century African American writers like Equiano were as conscious of national and racial identity constructions as are twentieth-century literary scholars in as much as their “African” consciousness was influenced by indigenously derived African ways of knowing and integrated into the literature of this period. Equiano’s Interesting Narrative evidences the use of indigenously-derived remnants of African ontologies and epistemologies in both form and content, with the engagement of race, class, and gender using Igbo narrative theories, such as chi in Igbo Cosmology and its complementary duality discourse on African ways of knowing.

Notable black American travelers, from poet Phillis Wheatley onwards, went to Europe and had their perceptions of America and racial domination shifted as a result of their experiences there. This had important consequences for their understanding of racial identities.

—Paul Gilroy *The Black Atlantic*

Whether the love of one’s country be real or imaginary, or a lesson of reason, or an instinct of nature, I still look back with pleasure on the first scenes of my life, though that life has been for the most part mingled with sorrow.

—Olaudah Equiano *The Interesting Narrative*

For “travelers” such as Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, the experience of Senegambia and Benin (Africa) preceded the experience of England (Europe). Significantly, these displaced Africans and their texts managed to survive by recontextualizing and rearticulating their fragmented African ontologies and epistemologies alongside Western ways of knowing. Just as Wheatley heroically appropriates African lineage and American identity in her revisioning of the neo-classical “Niobe” myth, Olaudah Equiano boldly asserts his right to reconnection and re-memory with his native Igboland through his skillful manipulation of Enlightenment and nationalistic discourses. Specifically, Wheatley’s courageous resituation of the neoclassical tradition within African and American contexts, as well as her brilliant use of the heroic couplet—doubled rhymed lines traditionally reserved for poetically rendering heroic the life or deeds of the archetypal white male—accentuate and highlight the nobility of black women. Equiano’s move is equally heroic, as he signifies upon the historical efficacy of imagined, if nonetheless real, national and national loyalties. Highlighting the indeterminacy of national and natural origins—through his reference to “real or imaginary”—the author acknowledges both his “intermingling” of fact with fiction, and his textual privileging of African vistas alongside Western ones. If, as biographer James Walvin suggests, “Equiano’s autobiography was written as a contribution not merely to the rising tide of British abolitionism, but as a story which spoke for millions of other African slaves who had no voice” (xx), then *The Interesting Narrative* is multifunctional in its representation of a life in progress, not a static representation of a former state of slavery or the penultimate moment of freedom. Consider, for example, Equiano’s conversions from African nobleman to Afri-

---

April Langley is an Assistant Professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Notre Dame and is an active member of Phi Beta Kappa Society and a 2001 fellow of the American Association of Universities. Her areas of expertise are eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African American and American literature and African American literary theories with a focus on autobiography/autobiographical fiction and African womanism, cultural and postcolonial studies.
can slave, from African slave to Atlantic slave, from Atlantic slave to English subject, from English subject to Atlantic flaneur, from Atlantic flaneur to Christian surveyor, from Christian surveyor to Christian missionary, from Christian missionary to Christian advocate, from Christian advocate to anti-slavery writer and abolitionist, from anti-slavery writer and abolitionist to autobiographer, from autobiographer to husband and father, from husband and father to African, American, and British ancestor. Representative of the extent to which early African, British, and American landscapes engage one another in the cultural and geographic registering of the Black Atlantic journey from Africa to Africa, the narrative’s depiction of continually floating and hybridized identities permits an exploration of the inter- and intratextual layers of dialogue used by eighteenth-century African Americans. Highlighting the circular journey from the African homeland to the African diaspora, The Interesting Narrative participates in what Gilroy calls a “redemptive return to An African homeland” through Equiano’s literal and imaginary “motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean” (4). For example, at the same time that Equiano reflects introspectively upon “the first scenes of [his own] life,” he also projects “the manners and customs of a people among whom [he] first drew breath” (43) and disrupts dominant visions of “almost every event” in between (236).

Neither willing, nor able to sacrifice one way of being or part of himself for another, Equiano builds upon familiar cultural resonances present within his physical world while he simultaneously recreates and constructs the distant, indistinct, unfamiliar or unreachable spaces within his African and Western worlds. Central to this act of simultaneous recognition and imagination is the invocation of ancestors as a means of reconciling seemingly irreconcilable selves that inhabit interconnected literal and figurative worlds. From eighteenth-century Afro-British American texts like Equiano’s to twentieth-century West African playwright Christina Ama Ata Aidoo’s play, The Dilemma of a Ghost—first performed in Ghana in 1964—themes of restoration and harmony are central to the literatures of the African Diaspora. In Karen Chapman’s terms, “the ghosts of the dead ancestors are invoked and there is no discord, only harmony and restoration of that which needs to be restored” (qtd. in Aidoo 34). That is, themes of multiple identity enable an intervention, through revisitation, at the critical sites of ruptured African cultural identity and political subjectivity. In Houston Baker’s terms, “the African who successfully negotiates his way through the dread exchange of bondage to the type of expressive posture characterized in The Life’s conclusion is surely a man who has repersed himself and, thus achieved the ability to reunite a severed African humanity” (38). Although Baker locates African recovery squarely within a language of economic exchange rather than identity interchange, the discursive fields remain, nevertheless, interrelated. In Althusserian terms, Equiano engages in an act of self-recognition (or “hauling”) without subsequently internalizing totalized or essentialized African or Western subjectivity. Rather than a psychoanalytic misrecognition that occurs when one mistakenly reads the reflection in the mirror as somehow more “real” than the (sometimes unrepresentable) self, Equiano recognizes the way in which master texts, and the master’s texts, have misread his multiple selves. And, through an act of doubled reading and self-speaking in his narrative—through a thematic placement and strategic engagement of his multiple and hybrid identities—he corrects those misinformed readings. Significantly, his corrections—or narrative interventions—are heavily inflected with cultural resonances and fragments that suggest the presence of African worldviews at work in his consciousness. And, more importantly, demonstrate the interchange and inter-exchanges between African and Western ways of knowing and expressing the self. Central to this act of simultaneous recognition and imagination is the invocation of ancestors as a means of reconciling seemingly irreconcilable selves that inhabit interconnected literal and figurative worlds. Adapting the psychoanalytic material present in the worldview he inhabits rather than being inhabited by its worldviews—Equiano imagines or recreates links between the African and Afro-Western in ways that reaffirm a continuum of active cultural consciousness which informed African agency and autonomy.

According to Clemora Hudson-Weems in “The African American Literary Tradition,”

Olaudah Equiano, a spokesperson for the equality of all people, carrying out the mission for blacks in particular during the critical Revolutionary War era when his slave narrative . . . carries us through a voyage from African freedom to American slavery in which he tops surveys and refutes the stereotypes of Africa as a heathen land and its people as uncivilized. This reversed movement motif was appropriate for the first slave narrative, whose protagonist himself experienced such a regression from having been kidnapped from his native land and relegated to servitude (117).

In contrast to existing and pervasive myths of “uncivilized” and “heathen” Africanness, Equiano constructs an epistemology of eighteenth century otherness in The Interesting Narrative that allows him to speak from within and outside the margins, while taking up the multiplicity of discourses necessary to improve
political, spiritual, and economic conditions for his African and Western brethren. According to Patricia Liggins Hill, the editor of Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition, the Interesting Narrative was one of the few books in the public arena authored by an African who was able to give such a clear record of cultural life on the rich African continent, which wealthy European powers were working so hard to destroy. Likewise, it is one of the few extant works from the eighteenth century that relates an African’s eyewitness account of slavery both in the American colonies and in the Caribbean. Equiano’s outspoken political activism against slavery and the slave trade was of inestimable value in the eventual decline of the nefarious institution on both sides of the Atlantic. Today, Olaudah Equiano, who was first published under the European name Gustavas Vassa given to him by one of his masters, is claimed as an influential, if unofficial, statesman, essayist, and prose artist on three continents—Europe, Africa, and North America (115).

Consequently, The Interesting Narrative, which is simultaneously spiritual autobiography, slave narrative, and protest narrative, challenges the inhumanity of slavery in its most oppressive and virulent various forms. Holding up a looking-glass to the divisiveness and greed underlying both African and New World slavery as well as the Christian hypocrisy, incorrigible brutality, and the moral and physical abuses based on color and gender prejudices underlying New World slavery, it is almost certain that the author spoke both for and from the perspective of other’s voices. As early as 1985, in his article “Disguised Voice in the Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas The African,” Wilfred Samuels asserts the cultural and literary significance of Equiano’s “creation of a self whose muted voice veils covert intentions” (65), while simultaneously refashioning himself into the “epitom[e] of the African man [heroic and ideal]” (67). Consequently, Equiano’s multiple visions and vistas have everything to do with “his efforts to build subjectivity in a world of reification. Equiano reclaims his voice by masking and disguising it” (69). Alongside the societal mirror Equiano offers a looking-glass image of a self remade, a self that not only comprehends and reflects a critical awareness of oppression and its debilitating effects upon the human body and soul but also seeks simultaneously to find ways to live, adjust to, and shape changes in a society that assigns little or no value to his existence. Demonstrating the transformative potential of traversing intra- and intercultural landscapes while simultaneously re-visioning historical, cultural, geographic, and political boundaries, The Interesting Narrative highlights the significance of diverse views which, like a kaleidoscope, utilize shards to “produce changing reflected patterns when shaken” (Oxford Dictionary, 483). Equiano’s kaleidoscopic narrative vision manipulates varying remnants of shades, mirrors, and lenses to refocus concentrated or narrow readings of African life patterns. Moreover, they suggest the wide scope of his interpretive lenses. Further, his multiple floating and hybridized identities not only made it possible for him to narrate and interpret the life of an African in the New World from African, European and American trajectories. They also illustrate the author’s ability to integrate Western and African ways of knowing in a quest for self-discovery and re-creation that does not disengage him from his indigenously derived African culture. I am indebted to scholar Anthonia Kalu for this critical insight first presented at the 1998 American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) Conference.

As Angelo Costanzo notes, “the eighteenth-century [black] narrators” had a closer connection to Africa, which revealed a particularly “African view of spiritual life.” Their works often conveyed a “confident sense of themselves as individuals . . . with a belief in their ability to play commanding roles in society’s spiritual and secular affairs . . . providing portraits of men who never [lost] faith in themselves or God” (25). Illustrative of this close connection is Equiano’s presentation of African landscapes that underlie his incorporation of multiple visions of African cultures alongside Western landscapes while offering his own multiple selves as a metaphor (or trope) for these landscapes. In this way, Equiano analyzes and participates in the foundational groundings of Western and African logic and philosophies of history, politics, aesthetics, race, culture, slavery, religion and spirituality. The Interesting Narrative unfolds the multilayered dialects of slavery and racism within the context of its implicit rhetoric of inter and intracultural marriage. Viewed through both a concentrated, unilinear directed lens which focuses in one or two primary directions, Equiano’s narrative reads and exposes the dichotomous relationships between slavery and the trajectory of the path to metaphysical and physical freedom. In the movement from freedom and slavery in Africa to slavery, freedom, and racial enslavement and oppression in the New World, Equiano complicates the notion of freedom through his developing and changing kaleidoscope that imagines communities across geographical and historical landscapes of African literatures and cultures of the diaspora. Carol Fabricant’s concept of “landscape as vision and place,” as outlined in the introduction to her 1995 edition of Swift’s Landscape, is particularly useful to an understanding of The Interesting Narrative as “an exploration of [the author’s] interconnected physical, textual, and ideological ‘landscapes’” (xi). In fact, The Inter-
esting Life of eighteenth-century African-British-American author Equiano is not unlike that of his Irish-English contemporary Jonathon Swift, it can be characterized by his complex and multiple cultural sites which "exemplify . . . his dual position, both as a man "determined" by history and as one 'free' to create his own history" (xi, my emphasis).

What this suggests, then, is that from one side of the Atlantic to the other, the question of "African" identity looms large within Western, Afro-Western, and African literary and cultural contexts. Thus, the question of What is "African" in African American literature emerges in the consideration of an imagined or invented "Africa" in the context of The Interesting Narrative. This study will focus on three African ways of knowing that underlie Equiano's vision and his relationship to the selves and the societies he inhabits: the concept of chi, its related Igbo concept of duality, and the complementary discursive mode of palava. In her groundbreaking Africa Woman Palava, Chikwemwe Okonjo Ogunyemi recuperates the homophone and feminine version of "palaver" as "palava," which means "trouble" or "quarrel." This critical linguistic move re-centers the African wo/man and child (African woman, man, child) through mutable transformative dialogue known as palava. "Palava" is used to explore women's transgression and enactment of radical politics of gender, class, and culture conflicts while they simultaneously build a bridge between males and females in an attempt to rebuild African communities at various levels—familial, local, village, urban, and country.

In "Chi in Igbo Cosmology" Chinua Achebe notes that "without an understanding of chi one cannot begin to make sense of the Igbo worldview." "Chi" he explains, brings together "two clearly distinct meanings of the word chi in Igbo. The first is often translated as god, guardian angel, personal spirit, soul, spirit double . . . The second meaning is day, or daylight, but is most commonly used for those transitional periods between day and night or night and day." (67). In their 1989 article "The Invisible Chi in Equiano's Interesting Narrative," Paul Edwards and Rosalind Shaw argue that the "central position given to God's providence [in Equiano's framing of The Interesting Narrative] had its roots in the Igbo conception of chi . . . sometimes described as a 'personal god' responsible for the individual's destiny" (146). Pointing to the integral relationship between chi and the notion of duality, Achebe explains that "in a general way we may visualize a person's chi as his other identity in spiritland—his spirit being complementing his terrestrial human being; for nothing can stand alone, there must always be another thing standing beside it" (67). As a result, "nothing is totally anything in Igbo thinking; everything is a question of measure and degree" (60). The concept of Wherever Something stands, Something else will stand beside it, supports this resistance to totalizing structures or absolutes articulated in chi, as well as the concomitant and fruitful palava it enables. The concept of palava is a productive mode of discourse which involves troubling or quarreling a problem or issue while working toward a viable consensus. This form of argumentation not only provides a structure for understanding the notion of duality, but is also fundamental to a more fully and more culturally contextualized rendering of Equiano's Interesting Narrative, which enables the reader to imagine the achievement of meaningful dialogue that always leads back to Africa.

There are at least two details of the narrative that invite a recuperation and re-visit of the African origins of Equiano's Western selves: the parable of the snakes and his encounter with the "watch," the picture and the muzzled African woman. Relating one of several encounters with snakes, Equiano notes:

We have serpents of different kinds, some of which are esteemed ominous when they appear in our houses, and these we never molest. I remember two of those ominous snakes, each of which was as thick as the calf of a man's leg, and in color resembling a dolphin in the water, except at different times into my mother's nigh house, where I always lay with her, and could myself to the ground and each time they crawled like a crook. I was desired by some of our wise men to touch these, that I might be interested in the good omens for which I did, for they were quite harmless, and would merely suffer themselves to be handled, and then they were put into a large open earthen pot, and set on one side of the highway. Some of our snakes, however, were poisonous; one of them crossed the road one day when I was standing on it, and passed between my feet, without offering to touch me, to the great surprise of many who saw it: and these incidents were accounted by the wise men, and likewise my mother and the rest of the people, as remarkable omens in my favor (43).

The prophetic foreshadowing that occurs in the antiphony between the young Equiano and the Igbo wise men, simultaneously invites and obscures any simple interpretation or meaning in the narrative movement between the "ominous" and "harmless" as represented in Equiano's snake imagery. This is a reminder that a person's chi has ultimate vetoing power and if either the individual or his chi does not agree, bad fortune may occur where good fortune was assumed. Equiano said "yes" to good fortune, but his chi did not agree. As Kalu argues, "from the point of view of duality his narrative (written against slavery and for posterity) provides a point of agreement between Equiano.
and his "chieftainship." (Reader Notes 1). For although both snakes fail to do bodily harm, and are, in fact, symbols of good fortune, in the chapter that follows we learn of Equiano's abduction into slavery. Lurking, then, in the unforseen shadows of both the "ominous" and "harmless" snakes were African, British, and American "snakes" waiting to mishandle him. Angelo Costanzo contends that Equiano "shows that evil snakes exist who are the whites—mainly the Europeans—who have entered Africa to corrupt and pollute, resulting in the fall and enslavement of the noble savage" (Surprising Narrative 56). Equiano's parable-like intervention into his narrative not only stands as a sign of the double-sided nature of men and the varying levels and types of slavery in Africa—African and Western—but also provides a prophetic foreshadowing of the life of one who is "favored" among all types of snakes. Indeed, Catherine Acholonu suggests it is quite natural that an Isseke Igbo would use a parable involving a snake to illustrate something as significant as one's destiny in this world, as "the snake is the Igbo symbol of spirituality" (83). Elder Egwuatu Onuweziaka, adds "the python was beloved among our people. We did worship it as other villages did and we welcomed it. We lived with it, and its arrival is always seen as a good omen" (qtd. in Acholonu 64).

In this context, it is possible to read Equiano's acknowledgment of his life as a slave as far less dehumanizing than those of his brethren as a continuation of the promises of his African community of elders and wise men. As the prophecy suggests, he manages to touch the hearts of good men, who like the "harmless" snakes do not mishandle him, as well as maneuver or navigate safely through the paths of those men who would abuse him. Equiano illustrates that the good and evil nature of human kind, the varying effects of slavery and the degree to which it affects the human soul, can be seen in Africa as well as in Europe. Though the "peculiar" institution of slavery in the land of the "red faced" or white men—for example in Europe, the West Indies, and America—is, by degrees, more horrific, Equiano does not represent a picture of Africa as a pre-lapsarian, edenic, pastoral experience. Equiano's comparisons and contrasts of his Christian and pre-Christian landscapes are not as artless as that. Alongside his rendering of an Igboland with plentiful resources, with talented, virtuous, intelligent and pragmatic people, he offers a society that deals with the same types of "disputes" and "crimes"—such as adultery, jealousy and internal battles—as any other society. Indeed, as the ex-slave narrator suggests, there is a "strong analogy . . . in

the manners and customs of [his] countrymen, and those of the Jews . . . particularly . . . in [their] pastoral state" (43). Equiano manipulates this "widespread belief among both supporters and opponents of slavery" (Vincent Carretta qtd. in Equiano, 246) about the shared lineage of Africans and Jews to assert, among other things, the shared "pastoral" and "uncivilized" states of the origins of all societies. His positing of Africans as simultaneously "analogous" to and yet distinct from Europeans, is a restatement (from an African perspective) of the ancestral history of the "polished and haughty Europeans" (45). At the same time, The Interesting Narrative clearly points to Western slavery's exacerbation of existing quarrels and its exploitation of existing systems of slavery in Africa. We are reminded of violations and intrusions into Igbo existing culture and society, as Equiano recalls for his audience that it is during his pre-middle passage journey in Africa where he first experiences the oppression of Western slavery and a yearning for freedom. Equiano and his sister are physically "overpowered by fatigue and grief" at their initial capture. And, later, after they are emotionally "deprived of even the smallest comfort of weeping together," Equiano "embrac[es] every opportunity to inquire the way [back] to [his] own home" (47-48). "I therefore determined to seize the first opportunity of making my escape . . . for I was quite oppressed and weighed down by grief after my mother and friends; and my love of liberty . . . which was strengthened by the mortifying experience of not daring to eat with the free-born children" (49). Equiano longs to be free (physically), but he longs as well for a return to a life which places him materially (and here I refer to his lack of material goods owing to his social status as slave) in his desired position as the son of a chief or elder. Equiano was a "member of the Isseke ruling kindred," and his uncle "was the chief judge of the village and therefore the ruler." Moreover, "his father, Ekweudu, was one of Isseke's great judges and titled men" (Acholonu, 35).

Although African slavery is no less a blight on his soul than New World slavery, it should be remembered that years later "he still looks back with pleasure on the first scenes [his] life, though [it] has been for the most part mingled with sorrow" (46) and remembers with care the things which were carefully implanted in him as a young boy—most prominently the significance of his Igbo name. In this respect, the parable about the ominous snakes who fail to harm him functions equally well to uphold the venerated African tradition of naming. "I was named Olaudah, which in our language,
signifies vicissitude, or fortunate also; one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken” (41). As Samuels so convincingly argues “resounding in the walls of this ideological foundation [of Essaka folkways, mores, and beliefs] is the constant reinforcement of his given role provided by his name: OLAUDAH EQUIANO,... its meaning rivets and records his unique identity (Making Crooked Paths Straight 8).

While an audience of British or American abolitionists and slave holders could hardly miss the political significance of an imbedded anti-slavery narrative implicit in his indirect reference to the inhumanity of the “snakes” who daily engage in the enterprise of slavery— as well as an underlying parallel between Christian providence and Igbo chi, such an audience might not recognize Equiano’s simultaneous signification of African-centered authority in invocation, through snake imagery, of African ancestors. Like the multifunctional lappa, The Interesting Narrative enables overlapping cultural narratives and multi-textual readings which invoke a host of inter-dimensional signifiers of which his predominantly Western audience might not even be aware. Ogungbemi describes “lappa as a” simple two or three yards of fabric [that] is versatile: it can be used as a dress, a blanket, a pillow, a curtain or screen, a mattress or sling, a wall decoration, or an aju to cushion and protect the head from the load it carries” (4). Her description of the vast uses of the lappa demonstrate its universality and invite us to think critically about its symbolic textual ubiquitousness. The simultaneously harmonious and cacophonous registering of Africanness and Westernness highlights significant tensions between conflicting but nonetheless cooperative world views. The Interesting Narrative’s purposeful imprecision subverts any simplified reading of the act of black signifying. The underlying textual patterns which inform Equiano’s African consciousness, and which enable him to bring a community of elders and ancestors into his Afro-Western text must be interpreted through a systematic unraveling of the multiple layers of meaning embedded in Equiano’s deliberate encoding of religious and spiritual practices from his West African Igbo culture. Encoded cultural interventions such as Equiano’s snake-parable are illustrative of the ways in which early African American writers identified African traces and markers. That is, rather than revealing merely blatant Africanisms, Equiano’s autobiography demonstrates the extent to which some black writers critically confront their deep sense of physical and metaphysical loss by attempting to recover or re-imagine Africa, through an invocation of the ancestors. If, as Malidoma Some suggests, the ancestors “represent one of the pathways between the knowledge of this world and the next” (9), and if one of the forms ancestors take in their transition from the living to the spirit world is that of a snake (Heuschen, 48), then I assert that Equiano’s snake parable is meant to provide an imaginary realm through which his Igbo ancestors can enter the literal (New) world and the figurative (narrative) world. Integrating his Igbo world into an African American narrative, Equiano embodies an intertextual tradition with spiritual and natural forces that inter-dimensionally link African worldviews with African American literature. Further, Equiano’s integration and registration of both Western and African traditions of “snake” lore are additional significations of his own multiple and competing selves. For, we can be certain that the Western and Christianized Equiano is aware of the biblically based literary allusions that his snake imagery—vis-a-vis the Genesis narrative—evokes in the imagination of his readers. The Interesting Narrative demonstrates Equiano’s consciousness of the contradictions between his Igbo worldview which regarded the venerated snake as a good omen and his Afro-British (and Afro-American) worldview(s) which associated the despised snake with the downfall of humankind. Evidence of the origins of the serpent, and its troubled relationship with mankind can be evidenced in scriptural sources. “And the serpent ... and the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him” (Revelation 12:9). “And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth he persecuted the woman, which brought forth the man child” (Revelation 12:13). Cotton Mather’s use of the snake in his Negro catechisms also suggests the ways in which Western interpretations of the snake have been used to pervert African ones. “Q. Who keeps the snakes and all bad things from hurting you? A. God does. Q. Who gave you a master and a mistress? A. God gave them to me.” (Slave Catechism”). Consequently, there can be seen a critique of the pervasiveness of unidimensional Western thinking which acknowledges one source of evil (or mankind’s destruction) to the exclusion of other, equally pernicious, sources of evil such as slavery and the oppression of women and children. It is original sin, rather than regenerative sin—which disrupts the perfect Edenic world and remains statically and forever the cause of Western inhumanity and evil. Ironically, because Equiano does not fail to mention these snakes “crept into...[his] mother’s night-house, where
I [he] always lay with her” (43 emphasis mine), he indirectly posits a reversal of this static disruption of the Edenic world through his resurrection and revisioning of symbolic enmity between the woman and the snake. The Fall of Man is reversed as the “man” child sleeps and both he and the woman (mother) emerge victoriously from their encounter—with the man, child, woman, and snake intact. In the language of the palava and the concept of Igbo duality, the boundaries among the three are liminal and power is distributed equally as the snake, the woman, and the boy all sleep peacefully.

Equiano’s re-visioning and re-visiting of dominant political and spiritual discourses through sub-dominant lenses is illustrative of his complication and deployment of gendered critiques of racial oppression that do not rely solely on Western-derived notions of gender. In her theory of Africana womanism, Hudson-Weems delineates the primary concerns of African men and women thus:

The Africana womanist, focusing on her particular circumstances, comes from an entirely different perspective [than those purported by Western-derived notions of gender] one that embraces the concept of collective struggle for the entire family in its overall struggle for liberation and survival, thereby resolving the question of her place in the venue of women’s issues (44).

Commenting on the expressed need for prioritizing (race, class, and gender) on the part of the Africana woman, Hudson-Weems insists that:

Africana people must eliminate racist influences in their lives first, with the realization that they can neither afford nor tolerate any form of female subjugation. Along those same lines, Daphne Miti Miriti summarizes [South African activist Ruth Mompofu] position that sexism “is basically a secondary problem which arises out of race, class and economic prejudices” (Africana Womanism: An Overview 215).

Hence, what we see in this male author’s sanctioning of an African woman’s centrality—in his mother’s placement within the critique of the Western myth of origins—is the emergence of an African woman’s “separate agenda.” This is what Hudson-Weems so poignantly refers to as the “unique experience, struggles, needs, and desires” (Africana Womanism 24). Equiano narrative reveals this acknowledgment of the interrelated struggles of African men, women, and children. He understands that his mother’s struggle will be with the unrecoverable loss of two of her beloved children, Equiano and his sister, to a race-based—rather than gender-based—system of domination and oppression. The African mother’s deep sense of loss comes as a result of the oppressive structures of domination that are fueled by the need for black bodies—male and female.

Beyond Equiano’s problematization of dominant constructions of gender, consider The Interesting Narrative’s complication of the notion of intertextuality, as both an inter- and intratextual structure, in his strategic placement of the Talking Book sequence.

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great deal of curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning; for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put it to my ears, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found here it remained silent (68).

Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggests that in the language of signifying, these shifting tenses “represent the very movement . . . from African to Anglo-African, from slave to potential freedman, from an absence to a presence, and indeed from an object to a subject” (157). However, examination of the shifting tenses does not adequately address the African slave narrator’s consciousness of his pre-existing condition of humanity. Recall that he has already been named and sanctioned by his Igbo ancestors. Samuels points dramatically to the source and structure of this African authority, asserting that:

Prior to his denunciation from his African motherland, Equiano’s total orientation is centered around his recognizing and comprehending the forest of salient primordial signs, symbols, belief, and practices of his Essaka culture and community that are in place to ensure both their continuation and his legacy and role as rightful heir and participant . . . theoretically, his age group provides an ideological field—a vehicle of being-in-the-world for him (Making Crooked Paths Straight 7).

Hence, Equiano’s engagement with dominant discourses is far more complicated than a naive assumption of white literacy as a means of self-identification. Equiano “often takes up a book” to read his master’s subjectivity rather than his own, and, in being better able to understand the “beginning” of his master’s “things,” he might be able to settle contradictions between his own understanding of Christianity and slavery in the context of European ways of knowing. For, just as in Jonathan Edwards’s Personal Narrative, written 21 years earlier, it is nature—his relationship to nature, the first sight of snow and the pouring of rain on his head—that stirs Equiano’s spiritual awakenings and increases his awareness of the existence of the Divine. The Interesting Narrative clearly outlines Equiano’s path to Christian conversion and sanctification. His link from nature to God comes not in the automatic “delight” (physical manifestation of the sensation of the Holy Spirit) as it does for other Great Awakening converts. Rather, it is the master’s tongue, the act of
interpreting through speech the written word that finally converts him. One hundred and twenty-three pages later we find that the “Ethiopian [is now] willing to be saved by Jesus Christ” (190). Equiano’s deep understanding of Christian doctrine surpasses the emotionalism of the masses indoctrinated with evangelical enthusiasm. Equiano understands the deeper and scripturally based meaning of the foundation of Christian salvation, that is, “faith comes by hearing” (Romans 10:17 my emphasis).

Driven by a foundational and African-derived ontology that privileges duality and indeterminacy but values tradition and ritual, Equiano is continually amazed by the incongruous nature of Western cultures. While he seems “pleased” that “these white people did not sell one another, as [his countrymen] did,” Equiano questions their failure to sacrifice or make offerings, and their practice of eating with unwashed hands. Here, as throughout his narrative, Equiano expresses his astonishment at what he perceives as white women’s lack of modesty in comparison to Igbo women, and initially finds the “slenderness of white women” “not to his liking” (68). Overall, based on what Dick tells him, Equiano is pleased by what he knows of God. On the one hand, his critique of white people’s ways is based on African spiritual traditions; while, on the other, his “cleanliness based” critique of morality (women, etc.) is grounded in the scriptures and Christian doctrine.

The Bible speaks extensively of the white man’s slavery of his people and others. This is why he includes the “Talking Book” in this section. However, the book is not only silent to him, but Equiano is remarkably silent on the issues in the Book (or The Bible) that show the history of the white man as problematic or at least contradictory to the will of the white man’s God. In his 1792 address to the United States Senate the great Seneca orator, Red Jacket, directly addresses this contradiction:

If there is but one religion why do you white people differ so much about it? Why not agree, as you can all read the book?... We understand that your religion was written in a book. If it was intended for us as well as for you, why has not the Great Spirit given it to us; and not only to us, but why did he not give to our forefathers the knowledge of that book with the means of understanding it rightly? We only know what you tell us about it. How shall we know when to believe being so often deceived by white people? (qtd. in From Many, One, 342-343).

He suggests that if the white man’s religion proves itself to be effective on whites, “if it does them good... makes them more honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, [the Native American people] will then consider [conversion]” (343). Gates has pointed to this moment of intertextuality as a revision of James Albert Gronniosaw’s earlier representation in his 1772 narrative. If the talking book is the “ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition” (131), then certainly the Bible is the “ur-text” of Anglo-European, Anglo-American, and African American traditions.

Early African American writers like Equiano expose contradictions imbedded within conflicting worldviews that constitute the ontology and epistemology of Judeo-Christian texts and contexts. In the act of transposing the Western “ur-text” in the register of the African “ur-trope,” Equiano is clear in his demonstration that he has the ability to reason—the demonstration of his ability to read or write. According to Gates, “the trope of the Talking Book... first occurred in a 1770 slave narrative and then [was] revised in other slave narratives published in 1785, 1787, 1789, and 1815... Making the white written text speak with a black voice is the initial mode of inscription of the metaphor of the double voiced” (130-131). But if the “ur-trope” establishes black intertextuality, black writers’ concerns with authenticity, and the literal and literary inscription of blacks into “being,” the trope of The Talking Book also early established black writers’ challenges to Enlightenment and humane letters. The Bible’s seeming failure to “echo” the voice of the black man (Gates 136), is contradicted by Equiano’s exposure of the white act of misreading blackness. That is, counter to white people’s literal reading of black (African) people as a sign of despised subhumanity the Bible is used by Equiano to support claims of humanity for all people. As such, the scriptural associations of figurative blackness and whiteness signify upon spiritual rather than physical characteristics. Hence, Equiano’s multiple and multi-dimensional ways of knowing “seeing” culture and people as texts of discovery and recovery, “reads” back in the written word what was seemingly absent—black humanity.

Equiano dismantles and deconstructs the Bible as “ur-trope” of white literacy by exposing the “life” or the “seen,” the present and even the spoken as more effective, vital, dynamic, viable and abounding than the Bible itself. Equiano understands that the book can only narrate or relate the lives lived. His juxtaposition of and engagement with the “ur-trope” can be seen as a critique of Western society. The life of the Anglo “ur-text” informs Equiano’s intratextual and multi-purpose reading as he unravels the threads of the Anglo “ur-text,” The Bible, by signifying on the behavior of the whites. For Equiano, the white written text can neither confirm nor deny the validity of black texts and, by extension, the humanity of its African authors—wit-
out an interpretation and transposition into African and African-synthesized registers. Equiano writes back, re-situating the story of his African and African American spiritual and cultural conversion by means of a kaleidoscopic memory that is informed by Afro-Western textures which authorize him to depict synchronous themes of Western, African, and Afro-Western life.

Equiano’s comprehensive critical interpretations are necessary to nourish the continuity and fluidity between early African American literature and cultures. The complex relationships between early African American literature and cultures are directly related to the contexts of African American literature and culture. The Interesting Narrative is connected through time and space in varying sequences that are often improvisational and sequential. Equiano’s text’s flow alters our vision of the constantly changing Western and African identity. His adherence to order, as in the unbroken series of circumstances, simultaneously maintains and shapes his landscapes. Equiano effects a rhetorical strategy which allows him to focus both on the abolition of slavery and the oppressive conditions that exist for African Americans. He muses in registers that both affirm his Igboness and celebrate his Englishness, using a unilinearly directed lens in which is imbedded a multi-faceted kaleidoscope. These two instruments not only provide different ways of focusing on political and cultural perspectives, but they also provide ways of scanning geographical and historical landscapes. That is, Equiano’s ways of seeing allow him to critically analyze the healthy synthesis of selves in inter- and intracultural marriages and focus on the dysfunctional elements that threaten their union.

Although Gates suggests that Equiano presents the trope of the Talking Book “in a self-contained paragraph, which does not refer directly either to the paragraph that precedes it or to the one that follows” (155), I would argue that Equiano’s juxtaposition of seemingly commonplace objects in a slave’s life: a watch, a portrait, and a muzzled slave woman, is strategic.

The poor creature was cruelly loaded with various kinds of iron machines; she had one particularly on her head, which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak; and could not eat nor drink. I was much astonished and shocked at this contrivance, which I afterwards learned was called the iron muzzle… looking about the room the first object that engaged my attention was a watch… after [I] observed a picture hanging… which appeared constantly to look at me… At one time I thought it was something relative to magic (63 my emphases).

Here, the watch, which signifies time also locates of a particular way of seeing from a temporal or historical perspective, the portrait which signifies the unilinear vision of his masters and Equiano’s critique and panopticon-like awareness of the importance of ways of seeing, signify upon types of knowledge which culminated in the Anglo “ur-text,” The Bible. The images of seeing and the different perspectives of barbarity and civility that they suggest are frightening to the young Equiano. It is important to note here that what enhances his fear of these objects of “magic” is his sight of the slave woman, whom he refers ironically to as a “poor creature” (63). They may be read as “elements of wonder” which signal his shifting subjectivity and the adult autobiographer’s (autoethnographer’s) attempts to convey the import of this alien culture on his spiritual and cultural conversions. Equiano “ends each of these objects with his master’s subjectivity” (Gates 155), as he simultaneously, and in equal registers, performs and analyzes the subjectivities that he reads through these “elements of wonder.” For, as much as the master’s picture or image follows him and he is seen through the master’s unilineal lens, he does not see his own image in the master’s looking-glass. Indeed, (by means of the picture) he refigures the master’s image, as a way of seeing the master through his own kaleidoscope and looking-glass. The master’s image is put at the service of Equiano’s looking-glass, and made to reflect a reality that can only be obtained by shifting to an African register.

Referring to the “artistic deployment of motion, of agility, which informs the Igbo concept of existence,” Achebe notes “you do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade” (Hopes and Impediments 65). The idea is that one must be both participant and spectator, in order to get the clearest view of a situation. The Igbo landscape is translated, vis-a-vis extratextual sources, in order to provide an improvisational score to be used as a key for re-reading the master’s history (time, watch). He is no more an object than the watch or the portrait, and the master’s concern with the image, or representation of things in history and myths of European superiority do not, for him, negate the shared existence of Africans and Europeans in the New World. According to Gates, it is only “when the master’s book looks to see whose face is behind the voice that Equiano speaks, [that] it can only see an absence, the invisibility that dwells in an unattended looking glass” (156). The looking glass is a metaphor for mediated self-sight. Just as Wheatley re-membered her African and Western selves in the recasting of the mythic “Niobe,” so the Western Gustavas Vassa recovers and juxtaposes the African Olaudah Equiano in The Interesting Narrative. Like Wheatley, Equiano re-members both the African and Western worlds in terms uniquely his own,
terms that simultaneously invoke African and Western ways of knowing and seeing. Indeed, seeing is knowing, and gazing upon multiple landscapes requires multiple ways of viewing those landscapes. That is, one does not merely view the African world from an African perspective or the Western world from a Western perspective to obtain a fuller or somehow more truthful understanding of the diverse worldviews by which they are constituted. The author concentrates on narrow views of diverse worldviews in order to situate them within the context of their own histories and cultural practices. He then holds up a mirror which offers a reflection of the seen or known based on a culture’s self-conscious projection and an outsider’s interpretation. In this way, Equiano interrogates subjective and objective modes of being and vision of knowing by offering a kaleidoscopic view which interprets narrative form and content from European, American, and African trajectories. The Interesting Narrative resists totalizing narratives of Western or African origins as it unsettles existing fragments and shreds of re-membered places, spaces, and identities. We are effectively charged, as readers, to distinguish “between two types of human cognition . . . knowledge of the world as it is” . . . and “knowledge of categories” (Moraes-Farias qtd. in Wynter 20). In Equiano’s case, what mediates the way he sees and knows his multiple selves and landscapes are Western texts and African contexts. Instead of simply internalizing an outward reflection of his African self, for example, Equiano reflects upon ways in which such representations either confirm or deny his experiential knowledge. In the process, rather than merely reading it, he becomes the Talking Book.

Registering yet another reading within an Igbo concept of duality—Where one Talking Book stands another stands beside it—Equiano speaks intratextually to his own African memory text as he re-reads the historical moment of his early capture in Africa.

Generally, when the grown people in the neighborhood were gone far in the fields to labour, the children assembled together in some of the neighbors’ premises to play; and commonly some of us used to get up a tree to look out for any assailant; or kidnapper, that might come upon us; for they sometimes took those opportunities of our parents’ absence, to attack and carry off as many as they could seize. One day, as I was watching at the top of a tree in our yard, I saw one of those people come into the yard of our neighbour but one, to kidnap . . . I gave the alarm of the rogue . . . till some of the grown people came and secured him. But, alas! ere long it was my fate to be thus attacked, and to be carried off, when—only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house; two men and a woman got over our walls and, in a moment seized us both; and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, tied our hands, and ran off with us (47).

In this reading the narrator’s re-membering of his watch not only juxtaposes the successful watch of Equiano alongside the failed watch of others, it also re-invokes the significance and relationship of time with freedom. Literally a lost “moment” is time enough for their captors to muzzle them, in much the same way the “unfortunate creature” is muzzled. The time for “crying out” is literally lost, not because of the failure of the watch that symbolizes recorded time, but due to the failure of the watch on the lookout for the difference between slavery and freedom. His anguish and fear at losing his freedom and his sister’s is repeated in the image of the slave woman whose “mouth [was] locked” so fast that she could scarcely speak (63). Equiano, like the “poor creature,” is “tied fast” and his “sister’s mouth” is “also stopped” (47). Yet, note that unlike the slave woman in the New World who is also tied so tightly that she “could not eat nor drink,” he and his sister refuse “victuals” out of their anguish at being deprived of their freedom. Equiano as the talking book, testifies, based on personal experiences, the horrors of slavery from one side of the Atlantic to the other. As he highlights the extreme cruelty of New World slavery, he signifies on the common spiritual and metaphysical cruelties of both African and Western slavery; emphasizing the feeling of desertion, of being separated from one’s kin, the loss of freedom, the loss of control over one’s own body and one’s own speech.

As Equiano mourns the physical and metaphysical loss through narrative re-membering, he recaptures his right of ownership to his memory and the right to re-member cultural and personal history. Ironically, despite a narrative voice which evokes the very real terror and fear of capture and enslavement, Equiano’s memory and personal history as an Igbo has been questioned by scholars, who argue that Equiano constructs an Igbo memory and identity out of anti-slavery texts and travel journals. Fortunately, the reality of Equiano’s claims are supported by West African Igbo who recall that period. As attested to by Equiano’s clansmen in Achebolu’s The Igbo Roots of Olatudah Equiano, Ambrose, a “native medicine man” of Isseke confirms that kidnapping of young children in this area was a primary concern:

Achomola: How were little children protected against slave raiders in the period?

Ambrose: Children were never moved from one spot to another without the protective presence and guard of a strong man. It was customary to keep children constantly under the protection.
of stout, strong men to protect them from those who stole human beings and sold them for money.

Achomulo: Was slave-raiding and kidnapping very rampant in the period?

Ambrose: Indeed, it was. Apart from the fact that Aro people came here to kidnap people, there was a woman who lived in the neighborhood who...was kind of a contact person for the slave traders in that place (48).

Rather than borrowing facts for a conceived African history, Equiano illustrates the reciprocal flow of authority, by authorizing certain white texts to speak about African people. He fully appropriates the anti-slavery texts of his time. The first edition of his Interesting Narrative, was published some five years after the death of Anthony Benezet and one year after the 1788 publication and twenty-seven years Benezet's 1762 edition of Some Historical Account of Guinea, Its Situation, Produce and the General Disposition of Its Inhabitants. Equiano's narrative is generously sprinkled with important truths and statements about Igbo people in particular and all Africans in general. Don Oghadike suggests that "the absence of professional historians and storytellers may well explain the confusion that characterized the early [written] history [such as Equiano's] of the Igbo people" (4). Given, the devastating risk involved in the loss of history, and its concomitant cultural genocide, it is worthwhile to consider not only, as many scholars argue, the contributions of Equiano's narrative to that history of loss, but also his use of existing factual and historical evidence about Igbo culture and society to reconstruct and put in place a written record of Igbo history from an Igbo perspective—perhaps the earliest of its kind. The irony is not difficult to see. Equiano's use of anti-slavery texts such as Benezet's—i.e., a survey of other anti-slavery texts—re-appropriates African knowledge from European texts and authors.

In this and all situations, Equiano's faith in his abilities allowed him to reconcile and successfully map out a place for himself in the Western world while resisting its oppressive state. Realizing the impossibility of returning to Africa—the failed attempt at the colonization movement to Sierra Leone notwithstanding—Equiano worked towards improving conditions for Africans on both sides of the Atlantic. His good character—reflected in both his African and Western selves—forced him into an honesty which liberated rather than incarcerated his identity. That is, Equiano created a space which allowed him to maintain a self that would function in Africa, Europe, or America, and which was committed to opening similar types of spaces for others. In this connection, Costanzo notes that eighteenth-century black writers like Equiano wrote mostly "not only [for] those [readers] sympathetic [to their plight], but also to those] hesitant individuals who required evidence that blacks were all members of the human family...those adversaries dedicated to the institution of slavery and the belief in the natural inferiority and debasement of the African" (18). Just as he reimagines gender, race, and religious and spiritual history in his re-reading of the relationship between the woman, child, and the snake, he re-reads the truths of his African homeland against (and alongside) the falsehoods of his New World detractors. The Interesting Narrative will stand—for his eighteenth century audience and posterity—beside the cultural fictions which the majority of his European audiences have accepted as the truth of Africa and African people.

In her essay, "Racism, Imperialism, and the Traveler's Gaze in Eighteenth-Century England," Margaret Hunt provides an excellent historical and cultural analysis of such fictions as she traces the shift from the popularity of religious tracts in the seventeenth century to a continually increasing popularity in travel literature throughout the eighteenth century. She states that "while the seventeenth century was the first century to see widespread literacy among urban middling groups, non-elite reading tastes inclined strongly to devotional books," with at least "one third" to "one half or more" of their "book collections" devoted to "religious books," and only a "sprinkling" to "travel and exploration" (333). However, by the turn of the eighteenth century, not only was there a "rapid rise in [the] popularity of secular forms of writing, with the travel books prominent among them," but the eighteenth-century literate public's enjoyment of them was "especially associated with and increasingly addressed to, the interest of the trading, commercial, or middling classes" (335). Of particular interest to "literate middling classes [throughout] England well before the last quarter of the eighteenth century were books on travel that bore on British colonies or on parts of the world as yet unclaimed by Europeans" (337).

Moreover, "central" to "this type" of literature was the "ceaseless need it seemed[ed] to inspire in the traveler to reconfirm received stereotypes about the people he or she encounter[ed]" (339). Not surprisingly, "visitors to Africa inevitably remarked upon the nakedness and heathenish character of Africans" (340). Costanzo also confirms that this "literate white audience composed mainly of middle-class religious persons" seems to have been substantially influenced by travel litera-
ture (17). Over time, most whites, without ever having been to Africa, held preconceived notions of the continent from the travel literature, which remained a viable source of the affirmation of the inferiority of blacks, and by extension, justification for their enslavement and cruel treatment. Travel accounts by people such as William Bosman, who claimed “negroes [are] crafty, villainous and fraudulent” and John Harris, author of *Collection of Voyages*, a prominent eighteenth-century travel journal, laid the foundation for race prejudice and justification of slavery that spread like a cancer in the white European consciousness. Eighteenth-century travel literature’s account of Africa was not different from the range of “scientific,” pro-slavery, anti-slavery, and even religious works, which provided unsettling myths regarding Africans to the same audience that read *The Interesting Narrative*.

On the one hand, Equiano’s narrative faced audiences whose opinions regarding this “sable” race were as moderate as those expressed in William Blake’s “Songs of Innocence and Experience,” and Thomas Day’s “The Dying Negro,” and as extreme as those expressed in the “scientific” notions of Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* (1735) and Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle* (1749)—both of which support varying themes of “biologically” based racial hierarchies. Linnaeus’s *systema* is an ordering of things within which blacks are considered the lowest human form on the bottom of the Great Chain of Being, while Buffon’s *histoire* asserts a link between the blacks and apes within his system.

Though Linnaeus believed various species of humans were created *ab origine mundi* by God without outside variables such as climate and geography, Buffon believed man’s connection with these outside influences had everything to do with his classification. Buffon’s “anthropocentric” system arranged various living organisms according to their relationship to man (*homo sapiens*). Linnaeus’s system, on the other hand, relied on a system of classifying humans on a strictly hierarchical basis with other animals. The significant implication here is that in Buffon’s system one could begin to draw conclusions about man’s relationship to animals in a non-linear sense. Put otherwise, in Linnaeus’s scheme man as his own distinct entity, within the animal kingdom, is classified according to certain human racial characteristics, but in Buffon’s scheme man’s position within the animal hierarchy is dependent upon how near or far he is situated to the lower animals. Africans were placed at the bottom of both systems of classifications.

The works of these “physical anthropologists” laid the foundation for even more elaborate or far-fetched notions of biological racism. The works of people like Virey, Rousseau, Blumenbach, as well as other environmentalists, biological determinists, anthropologists, natural scientists, either consciously or unconsciously, participated in the mis-education of Europeans regarding Africans. Sadly, even anti-slavery works did little to elevate the status of blacks above that of the noble savage (a title conferred upon Indians), or that of immoral, lascivious heathens, whose Christianization and freedom from forced bondage would make them docile “acceptable” servants. Yet, perhaps one of the most pernicious of all these influences upon eighteenth-century “enlightened” audiences remains its religious works as earlier suggested, works which long before the eighteenth century had already planted the seeds of black inferiority and white superiority in the fertile minds of not only the white, literate, middle class audiences, but the poor illiterate whites and blacks as well. Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative* could only improve conditions of the latter (both poor whites and blacks) by appealing to the hearts and minds of the former (middle class whites), in order to motivate them to join in the anti-slavery movement.

As for Equiano’s motivations, “the [narrative’s] chief design was to excite in [their] August assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave trade had entailed on [his] unfortunate countrymen” with the hope that the production of this document might “become an instrument towards the relief of his suffering countrymen” (Samuels, 65). Yet, his very skilful manipulation of multiple layers of meaning reveals intentions far beyond that of the anti-slavery movement. Samuels suggests that Equiano is not to be taken at face value, but rather that, he “is overly genuflecting but covertly . . . slashing away at his oppressors” (Qtd. in Orban, 662). Orban asserts Equiano is establishing “a distinction in the narrative between two different kinds of Europe” (ibid.). I agree with both Samuels and Orban, and would add that the distinctions they make with regard to the slave narrator’s masked intentions reflect Equiano’s speaking to a multiplicity of discourses necessary to effect change in his efforts to negotiate between several worlds. Hence, I suggest—against Orban’s claim—that “those at whose feet Vassa lays his narrative with the greatest deference and respect are” most definitely “the same as those he is condemning and rebuking” (662). Brilliantly, however, Equiano’s narrative stands as evidence that both deference and condemnation are earned not inherited on the basis of one’s race.
As an Igbo, with a conscious awareness of the concept of *chi* and the notion of duality—*in which *something stands another stands beside it*—any such lack of distinction or any negation of the particularity of Europeans (white men) would be a complete distortion of his African ontology. As a Christian, prejudicial rebuke or sanction would be antithetical to the scriptural caveat as "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female" and would amount to a distortion of the word, for which his "name would be taken out of the Book of Life." As a rational and intelligent man of the eighteenth-century such total essentializing of white Europeans would amount to the same type of stereotyping that had plagued his own black brethren, a fact Equiano is fully aware of. In fact, Equiano is careful to document a progression, throughout the narrative, of his knowledge of the white man based upon personal, first hand experiences rather than upon an isolated experience or hearsay or race prejudice. This is evident from Equiano’s first experience with the “white man with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair,” who at first glance, he was certain would eat him (55). This experience is probably not unlike the white man’s early encounters with the Africans, whose apprehension, is only part of the author’s intent here. The adult narrator is self-reflexively looking back on his early prejudices against whites, in order to illustrate (by example) the ways in which cultural prejudices are typically based on ignorance. In particular, African inferiority and European superiority was originally based on such ill-informed assumptions.

Equiano’s subtle use of this understated style of indirection should not be overlooked, as it sets the pattern for the narrative’s multi-level discourses that, while appearing to pass lightly over seemingly minute incidents, actually reflect a critique of larger issues. This narrative device questions not only his audiences’ “ways of knowing,” but also forces them to evaluate the basis upon which they have acquired certain assumptions about blacks. Moreover, he offers his audience a cogent example of how one ought to proceed when confronted with this type of fear. He first “inquires” amongst the chained men” of some men of his “own nation” and more importantly, his own status—of the intentions of these white men. When he is told he is in no grave danger as these men only intend to carry him to their country to work for them (56), he is a “little revived,” but still continues to observe the actions of these men in an attempt to learn more. It is not until Equiano becomes what he calls “almost an Englishman,” through his extended exposure—"between three and four years”-to their language, culture, and customs that he relinquishes such fears, which he attributes to his “ignorance [which] wore away as [he] began to know them” (77). Equiano neither relies solely on his limited experience with the white men nor on the opinions of others, but weighs each “way of knowing” equally and carefully. Yet it cannot be overlooked that in this period of his life, “every circumstance [with which he] met with only served to render [his] state more painful and [reinforce his] opinion of the cruelty of the whites” (58). Clearly these men belong to the category of those whom “he is condemning and rebuking.” And although three types of men appear repeatedly throughout The Interesting Narrative, they no more provide the only example of the white European men than their kind and benevolent brethren, upon whom Equiano confers “deference” and respect.

That Equiano encounters, in his quest for freedom and self-re-creation, masters and friends with whom he uses to depict varying degrees of benevolence is a testament to Equiano’s ability to address himself both to multiple narratives of slavery, as well as those of slavemasters. For example, though Captain Doran proves a kind master, he is quick to remind Equiano of “his power over [him]” (94). On the other hand, that “Mr. Robert King, a Quaker” is immediately distinguished as “the very best master in the whole island,” has more to do with his honest interactions with Equiano than his apparently humane treatment of his other slaves. Once again, the author’s understatement allows the audience to consider not merely truisms concerning “kind and benevolent” slavemasters who do not wrongfully use or abuse their slaves, but also the audience is asked to scrutinize what “true” benevolence might mean for a slave. Mr. King, who lets Equiano know that “the reason he has bought him [is] because of his good character,” gives Equiano a tool of empowerment “which he afterwards [finds] of infinite service” (99). This notion of benevolence is not only a far more complex one than The Interesting Narrative’s audience has probably examined before, but it conveys an anti-racist agenda into an anti-slavery text or narrative; a daring move for this type of text and for these times.

Additionally, Equiano’s presentation of African landscapes that underlie his multiple visions of African cultures, through the lenses of different types of slavery, undercuts many critics’ assertions that Equiano presents an idyllic African life that suggests a pre-lapsarian, edenic African paradise to expose, in stark contrast, Europe as the “true” country of “savages.”
While this is clearly the type of appositional reasoning that Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* is trying to (de)construct and indict, one cannot overlook the pronounced dissimilarities between European and African society. As a merchant bondsman, Equiano is in a unique position to have first hand knowledge as an insider and outsider of both societies. While still a slave in Africa, he is rendered an Igbo outsider by virtue of having been removed from his own people. In Europe and the New World, Equiano is an African outsider living inside an alienated (though assimilated) Western culture. As a result, he sees Africa from different vistas. As such he is privy to each country's beauties, as well as its blemishes.

The white written texts can neither confirm nor deny validity of black texts—and by extension the peoples they represent—without an interpretation and transposition into African and African-synthesized registers. It is Equiano, the Igbo, as much as it is Gustavus Vassa the Christianized Englishman, who writes back, re-situating the story of his African and African American spiritual and cultural conversion by means of a memory that is informed by Afro-Western textures. He writes using the fabric of his Western, African, and Afro-Western lives. Equiano's narrative points to the ways in which early African American writers translate limitations into possibilities and impingements into opportunities for imaginative and creative integration of alternative worldviews. By reconfiguring literary spaces into literal and figurative junctures, they lead back to a constructed and "imagined," but nonetheless real Africa.

**References**


Benezet, Anthony (1968). *Some historical account of Guinea, its situation, produce and the general disposition of its inhabitants, with an inquiry into the rise and progress of the slave trade, its nature, and lamentable effects*. London: Cass.


Mather, Cotton (1706). The Negro Christianized: An essay to excite and assist the good work, the instruction of Negro-servants in Christianity. Boston: B. Green.


